

How Power Corrupts Leaders

Why and how does power corrupt leaders?

Published on August 8, 2009 by [Ronald E. Riggio, Ph.D.](#) in [Cutting-Edge Leadership](#)

Most people have heard the line "Power corrupts." (Or the longer version, "Absolute power corrupts absolutely.") The question I'm often asked is "why and how does power corrupt leaders?"

The answer is complex, but fairly clear. [Leadership](#), at its core, is all about power and influence. Leaders use their power to get things done. A simple distinction is between two forms of power. Socialized power is power used to benefit others. We hope that our elected officials have this sort of power in mind and are primarily concerned with the best interests of their constituents.

The other form of power is called personalized power, and it is using power for personal gain. Importantly, these two forms of power are not mutually exclusive. A leader can use his or her power to benefit others, but can also gain personally (there are no poor former U.S. Presidents!). The obvious problem is when personalized power dominates and the leader gains, often at the followers' expense.

Yet, leaders can delude themselves that they are working for the greater good (using socialized power), but engage in behavior that is morally wrong. A sense of power can cause a leader to engage in what leadership ethicist, [Terry Price, calls "exception making"](#) - believing that the rules that govern what is right and what is wrong does not apply to the powerful leader "for other people, this would be wrong, but because I have the best interests of my followers at heart, it's ok for me to...." During Watergate, the argument was made that President Nixon could not have acted illegally because "the President is above the law."

Leaders can also become "intoxicated" by power - engaging in wrong behavior simply because they can and they can get away with it (and followers are willing to collude and make such exceptions "It's ok because he/she is the leader"). Some have suggested that President Clinton's engaged in a sexual dalliance with intern Monica Lewinsky simply because "he could."

Power has advantages and disadvantages for leaders.

On the positive side, power makes leaders more [assertive](#) and confident and certain of their decisions. This enables them to move forward on chosen courses of action. Leaders must use power to "get the job done."

On the negative side, the more people possess power, the more they focus on their own egocentric desires and the less able they are to see others' perspectives.

And then there are individual differences. Some people are simply power hungry and prone to use their power to subjugate others - they are ["leaders from hell"...but that is another post.](#)